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POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF TRUCIAL 'OMAN AND QATAR

ALEXANDER MELAMID

UNTIL the 1930's pirating, slave trading, and arms smuggling were the occupations of the native population on the southeast shores of the Persian Gulf, and they largely determined the status of the region in international affairs. Since then the oil industry, with its manifold economic and political aspects, has begun to replace these earlier "trades." The effect of this change offers an unusual insight into the evolution of states and their territorial and maritime sovereignty. Despite the present importance of the Persian Gulf in world affairs, information on Trucial 'Oman, and to a smaller extent on Qatar, is scarce and contradictory.

The Physical and Historical Background

Physically, the south coast of the Persian Gulf is uninviting. Shallow waters with dangerous reefs fringe the beaches, and the bars across the mouths of the many inlets and coastal creeks make them inaccessible to the smallest ocean-going vessels. The shore line forms the margin of a low, undulating plateau with a surface of sand or loose stones, which merges to the south into the even less hospitable and little-known desert of the Rub' al Khali. Occasionally the plateau is interrupted by shallow salt pans or by insignificant hills that may expose the bedrock, mainly Eocene limestone. There are no continuous wadies, or any other marked features. The low northern extension of the mountains of 'Oman, which terminates in the rugged and deeply indented peninsula of Masandam, forms the eastern boundary of the region. Rainfall is estimated at less than five inches a year, falling in a few winter showers. Temperatures on the coast are high: averages range from the high sixties in January to the nineties in July. Humidity is also high. Because of the oppressive summer weather, the oil company operating in Qatar suspends the work of its seismographic exploration crews from May to November. However, the humidity does not penetrate far into the interior, and exploratory activities in, for example, the neighboring inland oil fields of Saudi Arabia continue throughout the year.

The vegetation is scanty. Economically useful plants that grow without irrigation can feed only camels, sheep, and goats. Aside from a stable kept by the sheikh of Ajman, no horses are reported anywhere, and even the number of cattle is small.

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TABLE I—SUMMARY OF CHANGES IN TRUCIAL SHEIKHDOMS

TRUCIAL SHEIKHDOM	RECENT CHANGES
ABU DHABI	The largest Trucial sheikhdom, territorially better consolidated than before. Prospecting for oil proceeds on land; oil, of a better quality than the other Arabian oils, has been discovered at Murban (about 23° 50′ N. and 53° 45′ E.), but the full significance of the discovery has not yet been evaluated. A new oil concession, to last 65 years, for the offshore subsurface rights in the Persian Gulf, as defined in the 1951 arbitration award, was granted to a combination of British (Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) and French companies in March, 1953; the area is described as exceeding 12,000 square miles (no information has been released to show how this figure was calculated); under the terms of the concession, exploration must begin within a year, and drilling within five years.
DIBAI	The town of Dibai is expanding rapidly; its population is now estimated at 38,000. Two commercial banks and a hospital have been established, and there are regular bimonthly mail-steamer connections with Iraq and India. In view of the growth of Dibai, the headquarters of the British Political Agent for Trucial 'Oman are being transferred there from Sharjah. An offshore concession described as covering 1300 square miles was granted in August, 1952, to the same group of companies that have obtained the Abu Dhabi offshore concession; the terms also are the same, except that the duration is limited to 60 years. Drilling to 12,000 feet has produced no oil so far.
SHARJAH	Probably now the second largest of the Trucial sheikhdoms; includes the inland oasis of Dhaid and the town of Kalba, on the Gulf of 'Oman. The aerodrome near the town of Sharjah is served by three flights a week from Bahrein, the only regular air service to Trucial 'Oman.
AJMAN	No change.
UMM AL QAIWAIN	" "
RAS AL KHAIMA	" "
FUJAIRA	Trucial sheikhdom since 1952; economically unimportant.

by the Sultan of Muscat and 'Oman. After some skirmishes between the troops of Saudi Arabia and British-officered Trucial 'Oman levies, a standstill agreement, similar to the Palestine armistice agreements, was reached, which stabilized for the time being the positions occupied by the various states and armies. Owing to the location of Hamasa between the other villages of the oasis, this standstill agreement has resulted in some form of blockade of the forces of Saudi Arabia there; Saudi Arabian efforts to supply Hamasa have led to further bloodshed and complaints to the United Nations. Since the oasis of Buraimi contains the only sizable wells in the eastern Rub' al Khali desert, possession of, and free access to, all or parts of it is important to anyone who desires to rule, and exploit the minerals of, the Empty Quarter of Arabia. Several suggestions for amicable settlement or arbitration of the dispute have been made, particularly by the new King of Saudi Arabia (*New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1953). In view of the importance of the oasis, definite boundaries between Saudi Arabia, Trucial 'Oman, the Sultanate of Muscat and 'Oman (in whose Dhofar region a group of American oil companies has a concession), and possibly Aden Protectorate may now be established, though the process of definition would take some time. All the oil companies operating in the states concerned have announced their agreement to any new boundaries that may be drawn.—ALEXANDER MELAMID

PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

ARID ZONE RESEARCH. "Reviews of Research on Arid Zone Hydrology" (Paris, 1953) is the first fruit of UNESCO's Arid Zone Programme, which had its beginning in 1948. For study purposes the arid lands of the world were divided into eight regions—